

OFFICIALS PRAISE NEW BIOFUELS PLANT

By John Grant Emeigh

Montana's top officials descended on Butte Monday morning with praise for a new biofuels plant they're counting on to help break America's dependence on foreign oil.

U.S. Sen. Max Baucus, D-Montana, called AE Biofuels — a new research plant aimed at designing ways to make ethanol a "game-changer" in the country's move to find alternative energy sources.

"This is the beginning of something big and very important," Baucus said during the ribbon cutting ceremony at the facility on South Parkmont Road.

Andy Foster, AE Biofuel's chief operating officer of the Butte facility, said the plant will be a laboratory to refine ways of making cellulosic ethanol, which is a fuel made from the non-food portion of corn and wheat.

The Butte plant will be used to design the ethanol formula, which they plan to produce commercially at another plant, Foster said.

The location of this plant hasn't been decided, but Foster said they are looking world-wide. However, Foster assured that the Butte facility will be continually working to refine its ethanol product.

"This (facility) is going to be up and running for years," Foster said.

The \$1.5 million Butte facility will employ six to 10 people.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer told the crowd gathered under a large tent before the ribbon cutting that the founders of AE Biofuels are trailblazers in the field of finding fuel sources.

"They recognize the importance of alternate fuel," Schweitzer said.

U.S. Sen. Denny Rehberg (R-Mont.) said energy independence will be good for both national and economic security. He called Butte a "can-do city" and a good place for this facility.

Rehberg's Democratic counterpart U.S. Sen. Jon Tester agreed Butte was the right place for the plant.

"Butte. Why not do business here? It's the best place on Earth," Tester said.

Butte-Silver Bow Chief Executive Paul Babb said the city had little to do with AE Biofuels opening a facility in Butte, because it was started with all private money.

Babb said he thinks Butte's an appropriate place for a company like AE Biofuels to operate, because the Mining City has a history of producing many technological innovations.

"Butte was built on technology and continues to be at the forefront," Babb said.